

Holiday Shine Jade Buchanan

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Manny tossed his head back, laughing uproariously at his friend. The bugger hadn't been able to touch the puck all night but he was still sitting here trying to defend himself with every excuse in the book.

"No, seriously. I had that last one." Jack said, throwing his hands up in the air.

"Sure you did." Manny rolled his eyes. He lifted his beer, draining what was left and holding it up for the waitress who just appeared at their side.

Jack followed his example before reaching forward for more nachos. They had just finished playing for the last time before the holidays hit so everyone on the team was in a celebratory mood. The fact that they'd won their game was just icing on the cake at this point.

Normally, after one of their games they'd get a few of the guys together at the closest pub. Give them a chance to relax and get a few laughs in before they all headed home for the night. Tonight they were in one of Manny's favorites... A little hole in the wall pub that had good food, comfy seats and Canadiana decorations galore. He didn't think they could possibly cram another maple leaf, moose head, or hockey skate in here.

"So, you doing anything for Christmas?" Manny asked.

"Nothing special. My parents are doing a big song and dance thing, so I'll probably just go over there and hang out for a few days and mooch."

Manny grinned. "Now, that sounds like a plan."

"You?"

“Pretty much the same. Got the new sister-in-law, so César is going to spend the holidays with her family. Think that just leaves me with my folks and the runt.”

“You going to let the runt play with us? The little shit’s pretty good, isn’t he?”

Manny shrugged. His baby bro had been bugging him to play on their team this year but there hadn’t really been an opening until now. Not that their men’s league team was anything special. Just a bunch of guys who got together to hang out and skate a bit before going out for beer and wings... Still, the runt was pretty good. Maybe Manny would ask Rafael to join up. They had one guy that hadn’t shown up for a few weeks so he figured it was time to replace him.

Another beer appeared on the table before him, along with a plate of wings. Manny and Jack immediately reached forward to load up on more food. The noise level in the place was at an all time high. They’d pushed about six tables together and most of the guys had come over after the game. They didn’t always, but he figured it was because of the holiday. Everyone was in party mode.

Interspersed around the table were family members and friends of the players. The lucky – or unlucky, depending on how you viewed it – spectators from their hockey game.

Just as Manny turned back to Jack, the door to the pub opened up and a new addition entered the big room.

Shit, that was Connor Mackay, wasn’t it? They’d gone to school together, so Manny definitely recognized him. At least, Connor had been a year behind him but Manny had been friends with Connor’s older brother, Kyle, so they’d run into each other a time or two. What was he doing here? Manny’d heard he moved down to the States.

And why was Keith getting up to hug him? Manny knew damned well Keith was as bent as he was. Did he have something going with little Connor Mackay? Not-so-little Connor Mackay, actually. Shit, he looked good. He was still as short as he’d always been but he’d filled out some.

Connor was one fine looking man. Except for the rhinestone snowflake pin decorating his pea coat. What was up with that? Kid couldn’t look more flaming if he

was wearing a rainbow colored pea coat. Men didn't wear rhinestone snowflakes. Although, Manny had to admit, it did bring attention to his face.

He still had the same brown shaggy cut he'd always sported and his face was pretty-boy good looking, with full pouting lips and sparkling blue eyes. And apparently it was time for Manny to lay off the beer.

Jack must have noticed his attention to the newest addition because Manny was immediately bumped with a pointy elbow. "See something you like?"

"Shut up, jackass."

"Didn't know you liked them that purty, Manny."

"I'm not talking to you."

"Come on! You going to go over and say hi to pretty boy?"

"Fuck off."

Manny wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not that Keith led Connor over toward Manny's end of the table. The good news was that he finally got the attention of Connor.

"Manuel Rodriguez? Haven't seen you in awhile." Connor had the cutest fucking smile. He waved a hand at Manny, before tucking it back into the pocket of his pea coat.

Manny's attention was drawn to that damned rhinestone snowflake again. "Hey, Connor. You back for the holidays? I thought Kyle said you moved south?"

Connor's cheeks bloomed pink before he lowered his head. Shit, that was cute.

"Yeah, I went for a year to perform in a winterguard, but I'm back now. For good. Just got hired on at our old high school, actually." He peaked up at Manny. "What are you up to?"

"Not much. Hanging out with these losers right now," he joked.

Keith guffawed. "Not losers! We kicked their asses. Here, Conn, cop a squat beside Manny." Keith pulled up a chair from a neighboring table and squeezed it into the small space between Manny and Jack.

Manny didn't even need to see Jack to know his friend was probably nearly ready to bust a gut. He smiled as Connor sat down and fiddled with his pea coat. Keith wandered away, but Manny could care less where the man was going.

Connor grinned, before tilting his head at Manny. "That can't be all you're up to."

Shit, was Connor flirting with him? He figured the kid was dating Keith. Obviously not. Or, hell. Who knew?

"Naw, I'm working downtown. I'm an engineer during the day. Hockey player on evenings. General slouch on the weekends. So, you're at the high school? Doing what?"

"I'm the new colorguard instructor. It's just temporary." Connor dropped his head forward and pursed his lips. "I decided to go back to school and take some art classes so I needed something that was a bit flexible for work."

That was one of the vivid memories Manny had of Connor. The kid used to perform in the school's marching band as a rifle. Whenever their football team had a big game the band had always done the halftime show and Manny would never forget the sight of Connor running around in his little tight pants and tee shirt. Fucking hot.

"Nothing wrong with that," Manny said. "So, how's your brother?"

"Kyle? He's doing okay. It's great to be closer to the family again."

"Yeah? I know what you mean." Manny frowned. How was he going to be able to say this without just coming out and saying it? Ah, fuck it. "So, what brings you here tonight?"

Connor grinned. "Keith asked me to hang out. I, uh... I heard you were playing on the team. Thought it might be nice to catch up and all."

What the fuck? "So, you and Keith?" He arched a brow. He had to know.

"Oh!" Connor gasped. "No, we're cousins. I thought you knew that?"

It was Manny's turn to grin widely. "Nah, didn't know that at all. So, you came to see me play?"

Connor's cheeks turned a pretty pink again. "Not just you..."

"Uh huh. You seeing anyone right now?"

"No," Connor whispered.

"You want to get out of here?"

"Ummm..."

"It'll be quieter at the coffee shop down the road. We can talk. Catch up." Come on, kid. Say yes. Manny stared intently at Connor, willing him to answer.

"I'd love to." Connor shuffled in place before standing up. "I'll just say bye to Keith."

Manny nodded before reaching over and slapping the back of Jack's head.

"Shit, I didn't say anything!" Jack grumped.

"You didn't have to. I saw you open your mouth. Shut it if you know what's good for you."

"Have fun with your little pretty boy, Manny."

"Yeah, yeah." Manny chuckled. His friends were nuts. "Merry Christmas," he said to the table at large.

He got a chorus of happy holidays, merry Christmas' and happy new years in return. Walking over to Connor, he smiled before placing his hand on the small of Connor's back. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"Gladly."

Manny waited until they were outside before turning to the younger man. The parking lot was dark, and there was a distinct chill in the air. He exhaled in a cloud of frozen air. Lifting his hand, Manny smoothed a thumb over the rhinestone snowflake pinned over Connor's heart. "Cute."

Connor beamed. "Yeah? I think everyone should have a bit of holiday shine this time of year."

Manny took the opportunity to pull up the collar on Connor's coat. "It works."

Connor leaned forward, brushing his lips against Manny's for a moment before pulling back. Their breath mingled.

Manny licked his lips, trapping in the taste of Connor. Minty. "I'm glad you came tonight."

“Me too.”